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TITLE: Syringe Prescription to Prevent the Spread of HIV

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ISSUE: Making sterile syringes accessible to injection drug users are an important step to prevent the spread of HIV. In many states, a physician's prescription is needed for the legal purchase and possession of syringes. To the best of our knowledge, no one has previously pursued a policy of physician prescription of syringes in the context of medical care to prevent HIV.

SETTING: In Rhode Island, 39% of HIV infected adults reported injection drug use as a risk factor in 1997. Injection drug use associated AIDS accounted for 52% of all AIDS cases in Rhode Island, 1 of only 5 states in which injection-drug-use-related AIDS accounted for over half of the 11 total. In Rhode Island, injection drug users have among the highest rates of syringe reuse in nation with a mean of 24 times per syringe.

PROJECT: To address this issue, we have explored the possibility of prescribing syringes to injection drug users to prevent the spread of HIV.

RESULTS: After extensive discussion, the policy of physician syringe prescription has been fully endorsed by the Rhode Island Medical Society, the Rhode Island Pharmacists Association, and Rhode Island Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline, and the Rhode Island State Board of Pharmacy, and the Director of the Rhode Island State Health Department. It is expected that a program of syringe prescription will start in April of 1999.

LESSONS LEARNED: It has been possible to create a legal and political environment, where physician syringe prescription is legal and possible. It is anticipated that as physician prescription of syringes begins that further information about the effectiveness and practicality of this HIV prevention will be available.

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